

What do Americans think of school uniforms and dress codes ?

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1. Introduction

Usually Japanese junior and senior high schools require school uniforms, and sometimes their dress code is very strict. Junior Highs are especially strict regarding dress codes. But when students enter senior high school, it becomes very difficult to enforce these rules. Some students want to wear their uniform differently from the required style, or want to wear something specific with them. They may want to wear clothes or accessories that are fashionable. It may be quite natural for them to have such desires. Many girls in the school where I teach wear very loose socks, which have become quite fashionable among female students in Japan. The socks are very long, large and loose, and seem not to suit the school uniform at all. Why do students wear such things? An American TV company broadcast this news, noting students' desire to be different from others or to express themselves by wearing their socks in different ways in a uniform society.

Although the number is not large, some schools have already abolished school uniforms. As a matter of fact, when I was a senior high school student, a campaign to abolish the school uniform arose from among the students. Some students insisted, "We should have the freedom to wear whatever we want. The school uniform symbolizes control by authority." There was a long argument between the students and the school, and finally the uniform was abolished on one condition — that students must wear 'appropriate and modest' clothes. Most students in American high schools generally don't wear a school uniform. We see on TV, some girls in class wearing earrings and other accessories. American teachers don't seem to mind what the students wear. Yet teachers in Japan discipline their students regarding what they wear. They often use the following phrase, "Disorderliness of clothes means disorderliness of mind." If they notice students wearing clothes inappropriately, they tend to think the students must have some problems. What do Americans think of this relation between clothes and mind, I wonder? Do Americans see a relationship between clothes and mind? Do Japanese and Americans view freedom differently?

2. Aims and Methodology

I carried out this survey as an assignment of the English Language Program of the University of Pennsylvania (Community Interaction Program). I went to the university on the Monbusho's 1997 Two-month Overseas Study Programs for Japanese teachers of English, and stayed there for five weeks during the summer. The aim of this survey was

to answer the following question, “What do Americans think of school uniforms and dress codes?” My method was to ask 21 people to answer the 10 questions found at the end of this report. I interviewed them near the campus of the university and in downtown Philadelphia.

3. Results and Discussions

Age distribution of subjects was as follows :

Age	Teens	20s	30s	40s	50s	60s	70s	80s
Number of Subjects	3	4	1	3	3	3	2	2

The results of several items on my questionnaire seemed interesting. Let’s begin with this question.

Do you think it’s better for a high school to have a dress code ?

Yes	No
15	6

Surprisingly, a large majority answered yes. I checked whether there was any preference by age groups, but there was no tendency for younger or older individuals to support either of the answers. It’s noteworthy that many subjects, including those in their teens and 20s supported the idea that high schools should have a dress code. Some reasons they mentioned were that there would be no competition, or no need to worry about what to wear. Others referred to economic reasons, avoiding distractions, training, equality, etc. Several respondents talked about the social problems caused by what students wear, for example, theft, violence, and even murder in big cities. On the other hand, the reasons why they answered no were that everyone has a different preference and freedom to express themselves.

Usually Japanese high schools have a strict dress code and students must wear a designated school uniform properly, for example, the color of the socks should be white, the shoes should be black and so on. They must not wear earrings or have pierced ears. I asked the interviewees what they think of that ? Their answers were mostly positive ;

Positive	Negative	Others
13	7	1

When asked about school uniforms and dress codes in Japan, 13 subjects gave positive answers. Nevertheless some commented small accessories or minor difference might be acceptable. On the other hand, seven subjects gave negative answers. The most

extreme responses were “It’s ridiculous!” or “It’s too strict.” Some said students’ clothes should be OK as long as they are not fancy. One of them said, “I’m in favor of modest clothes, but I am against school uniforms.” It seems to me that these responses are quite reasonable and understandable, and in Japan a majority of Japanese now will give similar answers.

Let’s go on to the next question. Do you think dress codes mean control by authority or limit freedom of expression? Contrary to expectation again, ten respondents think control by authority is necessary and some said especially school-age students should be controlled by authority.

Control by authority	Limitation of freedom of expression	Neither
14 (Positive 10, Negative 4)	5	6

Again “control by authority” was supported even by the youngest respondents. One of the 10 subjects who expressed positive ideas about “control by authority”, went so far as to say they need more control. To my question, “Don’t you think dress codes limit freedom of expression?”, some answered, “There are many other ways to express themselves. It’s good for them to have discipline.” Those who answered, “It is neither control by authority nor limitation of freedom of expression.” can be said to have a more positive attitude toward dress codes. So a total of 16 subjects have a positive idea toward dress codes. The results mainly agree with my observation about the question whether they think it’s better for a high school to have a dress code. And only five subjects answered, “Dress codes limit freedom of expression.” Of these, four subjects answered dress codes also indicated control by authority. They think of dress codes very negatively and for them the “control by authority” can be judged to have a very negative meaning. Now we understand there are both a positive and a negative way of thinking about control of authority.

My last question I would like to talk about is the following one. Do you think disorderliness of clothes means disorderliness of mind? We often see young adults wearing “sloppy” attire intentionally. Their clothes are sometimes rather messy, it seems. As time passes and children grow into adulthood, they physically grow bigger, naturally. But what about their mind? What kind of mental or emotional growth cause them to wear such clothes? In Japan, as I referred in my introduction, when we discipline students, we often say, “Your disorderly clothes are a sign of your disorderly mind.” What do Americans think of this saying? Because I thought Christianity is based on dualism and that Christians separate inner and outer cosmos distinctly, I guessed that most answers to my question would be negative ones. In fact, 15 respondents insisted

that disorderliness of clothes does *not necessarily* means disorderliness of mind.

Yes	No
6	15

Their negative answers are understandable. Sometimes we see talented people not only in the “arts” but also lawyers, engineers, and professionals, wearing messy clothes. Admitting this, we also may be able to notice several signs on their clothes which may tell us about their character. I had a chance to talk about the question with a principal of a high school for Mennonite students. She told me an interesting story. She said, “Every student has two windows, through which I think I can understand their personality. One window is their eyes and the other is their clothes. I’m very interested in what kind of clothes they wear. For their clothes sometimes give me a clue to understand their mind.”

Only six subjects answered yes. If I asked the same question in Japan, I think a higher percentage of people would answer yes. Of those who said yes, some said, “I believe so definitely.”, or “100 % yes,” so there are certain Americans who link clothes to mind, too.

4. Conclusion

Surprisingly, I found that Americans are rather conservative about dress codes and a large majority of them think it’s a good thing and a good way to control. Even young respondents in their teens and twenties supported dress codes. Only 5 subjects believed dress codes limit freedom of expression. American private schools usually have a school uniform like Japan and their dress code is strict. On the other hand, most public schools don’t have a school uniform, but they usually have a dress code. The strictness of a dress code is different from school to school. There is a tendency for some public schools to adopt a stricter dress code or even a school uniform, too. During my homestay in North Carolina, I had the chance to visit a public middle school which has a school uniform. I asked several students there if they like their school uniform. All of them answered yes. I thought it very peculiar.

The reasons why there are so many Americans in favor of stricter dress codes, seem to come partly from such problems as distraction, thefts, fighting, and even murders caused by competition for showing off of their clothes. To solve those problems in high school, it seems that they think it’s necessary to control students’ clothes. And they don’t think it limits freedom of expression.

To conclude this report I would like to list the words mentioned by the interviewees for my question ‘What kinds of rules do you think teachers should teach high school

students foremost?'. To those who supported dress codes, I added 'besides dress codes.'

Behave. Think for yourself. Respect for others(older people, yourself). Study(Subject). Self-control. Get along with others. Discipline. Good manners. Strictness. Honesty. Politeness. Reward for hard work. Respect for teachers. Not speaking in class. Punctuality. Health. Believe in yourself.

Questionnaire

(These question were asked orally. Depending on the age of interviewees, I changed the questions of No.3 and 4 into the following 'Does your high school?' and 'Is the school?'.)

1. Where in the USA are you from?
2. What age group do you belong to?
Teens, 20s, 30s, 40s, 50s, 60s, 70s, 80s
3. Did your high school have a school uniform or a dress code?
4. Was the school a public school or a private one?
5. Do you think it's better for a high school to have a dress code?
6. If you think so, why? If you don't think so, why not?
7. Usually Japanese high schools have a strict dress code and students must wear a designated school uniform properly, for example, the color of the socks should be white, the shoes should be black and so on. They must not wear earrings or have pierced ears, What do you think of that?
8. Do you think dress codes mean control by authority or limit freedom of expression?
9. Do you think disorderliness of clothes means disorderliness of mind?
10. What kinds of rules do you think teachers should teach high school students foremost?

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